



Beyond the crowds: locals lead a sustainable reset of tourism

EU-backed researchers are working with communities in overlooked regions to create tourism strategies that promote heritage while ensuring long-term sustainability.

23 September 2025 – By SOFIA SANCHEZ MANZANARO

Europe's most popular travel destinations are feeling the strain of their own success. From Paris to Dubrovnik, mass tourism brings overcrowding and pollution. Yet just beyond these hotspots lie regions eager to welcome visitors. EU-funded researchers believe they have found a way to channel tourism more sustainably.

One such place is Trebinje, in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina. With its rich history, Mediterranean climate and tasty produce – from robust wines to golden honey – the town has plenty to offer. Its urban fabric reflects centuries of different cultural influences, including Ottoman, Venetian and Austro-Hungarian.

And yet, despite lying just 30 kilometres from Dubrovnik, Trebinje remains absent from most travel guides.

Across the border, Dubrovnik is a striking example of overtourism. Home to around 41 000 residents, it was visited by 1.4 million tourists in 2024, according to Croatia's Ministry of Tourism. The lesson for Trebinje is clear. To build up tourism without repeating its neighbour's mistakes, it must take another path.

Communities first

Trebinje was one of eight pilot sites in a four-year EU-funded initiative called TExTOUR, which wrapped up in September 2024. The project partners tested innovative approaches for encouraging sustainable tourism in lesser-known regions.

For Isidora Karan, a Bosnian architect and urban space researcher, and local lead of TExTOUR, Trebinje's proximity to tourist magnets such as Dubrovnik, Montenegro's Bay of Kotor and Bosnia's Mostar is an advantage, but also a challenge

“In summer, many of our young people leave to work there, and there is a fear the town will stay empty unless we find inclusive and novel ways to engage young people with cultural tourism,” she said.

Rather than roll out ready-made solutions, researchers worked with communities to identify local strengths and design tourism projects that fit them. Technology, such as sensors and QR codes, was part of the story, but at its heart was engagement with residents.

“Developing a region’s cultural tourism is a process in which the entire community should actively participate so the solutions correspond to that community’s real interests and needs,” said Daniel Basulto, a conservation specialist who coordinated the researchers’ work.

This community-first approach fits neatly with the European Commission’s [upcoming tourism strategy](#), which prioritises sustainability and innovation.

Testing new models: from Trebinje to Portugal

Basulto is based at the Fundación Santa María la Real, a non-profit organisation in Aguilar de Campoo, northern Spain, that promotes sustainable tourism through cultural heritage.

To put their approach to the test, Basulto and his team selected sites in eight EU Member States and three non-EU countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon and Ukraine.

The aim was not to bring in huge crowds, but to build resilience. “We weren’t aiming to flood these areas with tourists. Our goal was to make them sustainable so local people could stay, rather than leave to find work elsewhere.”

Basulto himself is no stranger to rural living, having opted to live in Aguilar de Campoo, a rural municipality of 6 000 inhabitants.

“I came here because I wanted to raise a family in a rural environment and have direct contact with heritage and landscape,” he said.

Living culture

The TExTOUR team in Trebinje began by listening. Workshops brought residents together to shape ideas for the town’s tourism future.

Karan stressed that workshop participants did not want mass tourism to make their town unliveable, noting that tourism was already pushing up housing prices and prompting uncontrolled construction.

“It is changing the image of the city and endangering what we consider unique,” she said.

One objective was to draw attention to the heritage sites that are underused, and involve them in urban life. Notably Krš, one of the oldest urban settlements in the Trebinje area, which has faced decades of decay despite its historical importance.

In 2023, the team launched an arts festival in Krš, bringing life back to the neighbourhood. Before the event, project members mingled with local residents, artists and artisans.

“People living in Krš really loved it, and they helped us with the installation of a pop-up pergola,” said Karan. The pergola built for the festival became a neighbourhood fixture, used for annual celebrations over the next two years.

Another strategy was to draw attention to areas outside the historic city centre and avoid overcrowding, so the themed routes were created to the sites of interest in nearby and rural areas.

Along the routes, QR codes provided information and stories related to different sites, including details on hiking trails, cycling paths, kayaking and transport options.

The researchers also partnered with Slow Food Trebinje – a local branch of the international Slow Food movement – to set up a small gastronomy school. Hospitality students learned to reinterpret traditional dishes, with the aim of keeping their skills – and jobs – in town.

Guardians of the Palaeolithic

Over 3 000 kilometres away in northeastern Portugal, the Vale do Côa is home to one of Europe's largest collections of Palaeolithic rock art. Thousands of engravings depicting horses, aurochs and goats stretch along the Côa River, earning the valley UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1996.

To protect these fragile artworks, visits are limited to guided night tours. Workshops organised by the TExTOUR team inspired local residents to get more involved when they came up with the idea of training young people and older community members to act as cultural caretakers.

Residents aged from 12 to 25 and over 60 were offered the opportunity to learn about heritage conservation and local history. The aim was to help protect the site, and also share this knowledge with tourists, schools and universities.

“Our goal was to promote the site while preserving its unique character,” said Basulto.

Community-driven tourism

For Basulto, TExTOUR's key lesson is clear: the community is the driving force. Lasting tourism must be built with local people.

He is now involved in a new EU-funded initiative, ULTREIA Sudoe, which promotes traditional food and artisanal products along the pilgrimage routes of the world-famous Camino de Santiago. It also plans to use sensors to monitor visitor numbers and better manage flows.

“It is not about increasing hotel capacity, but rather about organising activities that attract visitors and enabling them to discover our heritage, while preserving our culture,” he said.

Tourism will remain central to Europe's economy. But the experiences of Trebinje, Vale do Côa and the other test sites show that a viable alternative exists. One where communities themselves set the pace.

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